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AUTHOR Geuder, Patricia A.
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ABSTRACT

One rich cultural beginning embedded in contemporary Chicano literature is the language(s) of the literature. In this respect, Chicano literature and sociolinguistics are concomitants: the use of sociolinguistics increases the understanding of the use of the language(s) found in the literature: of the contextual references made about language(s): and of the content, form, and kinesic code of conversational etiquette modes. (Author)

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SOCIOLINGUISTICS and CHICANO LITERATURE

RMMLA at Laramie

Patricia A. Geuder, Ph.D.

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SOCIOLINGUISTICS AND CHICANO LITERATURE

Marcela Trujillo in her essay "Chicano Writers and Poets" makes this concluding statement:

> ...Chicano literature should not be treated in isolation or in a vacuum. It had rich cultural beginnings and it behooves all literature teachers and critics to become familiar with that background which has not been taught in U.S. classrooms.[1]

One rich cultural beginning embedded in contemporary Chicano literature is the language/languages of the literature. In this respect, Chicano literature and sociolinguistics are concomitants: the use of sociolinguistics increases the understanding of the use of the language/languages found in the literature; of the contextual references made about language/languages; and of the content, form, and kinesic code of conversational etiquette modes.

The language/languages used in Chicano literature in and of themselves are of sociolinguistic importance. The languages found in the literature are the result of continuing political-social-economic forces. Historically and presently, these forces created and, to a degree, have maintained conterminous speech communities: Spanish-speaking Chicanos and English-speaking Anglos living in geographic proximity but exhibiting ethnic and sociocultural, especially including linguistic, differences. Political-social-economic forces also created and - to a degree - have maintained language islands: concentrations of Spanish-speaking Chicanos living in close geographic proximity and exhibiting ethnic and socio-

cultural, and especially including linguistic, similarities. In these islands, Spanish has been maintained: regardless of varieties of regional and social dialects, regardless of the attempts by public schools (in earlier times) to obliterate its use, and regardless of Anglo attempts to devaluate both the language and speakers of the language.

The language/languages of Chicano literature are crucial considerations in the selection of materials for a course in Chicano literature. To choose Chicano literature written exclusively in Spanish is to deny literary access to non-readers of Spanish. Furthermore, to choose Chicano literature written exclusively in Spanish is to omit an extensive amount of meritorious literature written completely or primarily in English. Conversely, to choose Chicano literature written only in English is to exclude quality literature in Spanish and to ignore a feature of much Chicano literature: i.e., the meshing of much Spanish with little English or the meshing of much English with little Spanish. However, with the establishment of Chicano publishing firms and publication of autochthonous Chicano literature, the range of appropriate selections of materials for course readings steadily increases.

Part (but certainly not all) of the essence of Chicano literature lies with the language/languages chosen for expression. Five patterns are discernible. Two of the five patterns represent linguistic differences. One of the two patterns is the exclusive use of Spanish (without the complementary presentation of an English translation). This pattern demonstrates a writer's preference for a language appropriate for his literary purpose and for a particular readership. The reverse pattern is the exclusive use of English.

A third pattern is the presentation of a work first in Spanish and second in English, such as "...y no se lo trago' la tierra"/"...and the earth did not part." The primacy of Spanish is, perhaps, a commentary on the sequence of language acquisition. Also, the vertical--as opposed to the horizontal--concurrence of the work in two languages suggests that the author writes for readers of Spanish and translates for non-readers of Spanish. Yet this pattern is reversed in Gonzales' I Am Joaquin/Yo Soy Joaquin. At any rate, the vertical concurrence is a source for contrastive reading for bilingual readers and a courtesy (or a concession) to monolingual readers.

An approximate balance between the use of Spanish and the use of English is a fourth pattern. Montoya in "La Jefita," for example, begins with a line in English and concludes it with Spanish: "When I remember the campos." He then reverses the process in the succeeding line: "Y las noches and the sounds." The third line again begins with English and ends with Spanish: "Of those nights en carpas o."[2] The entire poem is a study in the meshing of English with Spanish and Spanish with English. The mathematical, but not mechanical, meshing process of words within lines, lines with lines within stanzas, results not only in binary phenomenon but also in tertiary perspective.

The last discernible pattern is a predominance of English with a minimum of Spanish. In Rivera's "The Rooster Crows En Iowa Y En Texas," only the title of the poem and one line in the poem contain Spanish[3]; and in Montoya's "Los Vatos," only three Spanish words are used.[4]

References to language, both Spanish and English, vary in intensity and specificity. Ernesto in Galarza's Barrio Boy implies his evaluation of English and the methodology used to teach English to non-native speakers:

> ...And when I least expected it, there she [Miss Ryan] was, crouching by my desk, her blond radiant face level with mine, her voice patiently maneuvering me over the awful idiocies of the English language.
>
> During the next few weeks Miss Ryan overcame my fears of tall, energetic teachers as she bent over my desk to help me with a word in the pre-primer. Step by step, she loosened me and my classmates from the safe anchorage of the desks for recitations at the blackboard and consultations at her desk. Frequently she burst into happy announcements to the whole class. "Ito can read a sentence," and small Japanese Ito, squint-eyed and shy, slowly read aloud while the class listened in wonder: "Come, Skipper, come. Come and run." The Korean, Portugese, Italian, and Polish first graders had similar moments of glory, no less shining than mine the day I conquered "butterfly," which I had been persistently pronouncing in the standard Spanish as boo-ter-flee. "Children," Miss Ryan called for attention. "Ernesto has learned how to pronounce butterfly!" And I proved it with a perfect imitation of Miss Ryan. From that celebrated success, I was soon able to match Ito's progress as a sentence reader with "Come, butterfly, come fly with me."
>
> Like Ito and several other first graders who did not know English, I received private lessons from Miss Ryan in the closet, a narrow hall off the classroom with a door at each end. Next to one of these doors Miss Ryan placed a large chair for herself and a small one for me. Keeping an eye on the class through the open door she read with me about sheep in the meadow and a frightened chicken going to see the King, coaching me out of my phonetic ruts in words like pasture, bow-wow-wow, hay, and pretty, which to my Mexican ear and eye had so many unnecessary sounds and letters. She made me watch her lips and then close my eyes as she repeated words I found hard to read. When we came to know each other better, I tried interrupting to tell Miss Ryan how we said it in Spanish. It didn't work She only said "oh" and went on with pasture, bow-wow-

> wow, and pretty. It was as if in that closet we were both discovering together the secrets of the English language and grieving together over the tragedies of Bo-Peep...[5]

Antonio in Anaya's Bless Me, Ultima expresses the trauma of going to school for the first time. Anaya conveys the strangeness of the situation, a large part of which is related to language:

> Somehow I got to the schoolgrounds, but I was lost. The school was larger than I had expected. Its huge, yawning doors were menacing. I looked for Deborah and Theresa, but every face I saw was strange. I looked again at the doors of the sacred halls but I was too afraid to enter. My mother had said to go to Miss Maestas, but I did not know where to begin to find her. I had come to the town, and I had come to school, and I was very lost and afraid in the nervous, excited swarm of kids.
>
> It was then that I felt a hand on my shoulder. I turned and looked into the eyes of a strange red-haired boy. He spoke English, a foreign tongue.
>
> "First grade," was all I could answer. He smiled and took my hand, and with him I entered school. The building was cavernous and dark. It had strange unfamiliar smells and sounds that seemed to gurgle from its belly. There was a big hall and many rooms, and many mothers with children passed in and out of the rooms.
>
> I wished for my mother, but I put away the thought because I knew I was expected to become a man. A radiator snapped with steam and I jumped. The red-haired boy laughed and led me into one of the rooms. This room was brighter than the hall. So it was like this that I entered school.
>
> Miss Maestas was a kind woman. She thanked the boy whose name was Red for bringing me in then asked my name. I told her I did not speak English.
>
> "¿Cómo te llamas?" she asked.
>
> "Antonio Márez," I replied. I told her my mother said I should see her, and that my mother sent her regards.

> She smiled. "Anthony Marez," she wrote in a book. I drew closer to look at the letters formed by her pen. "Do you want to learn to write?" she asked.
>
> "Yes," I answered.
>
> "Good," she smiled.
>
> I wanted to ask her immediately about the magic in the letters, but that would be rude and so I was quiet. I was fascinated by the black letters that formed on the paper and made my name. Miss Maestas gave me a crayon and some paper and I sat in the corner and worked at copying my name over and over. She was very busy the rest of the day with the other children that came to the room. Many cried when their mothers left, and one wet his pants. I sat in my corner alone and wrote. By noon I could write my name, and when Miss Maestas discovered that she was very pleased.
>
> She took me to the front of the room and spoke to the other boys and girls. She pointed at me but I did not understand her. Then the other boys and girls laughed and pointed at me. I did not feel so good. Thereafter I kept away from the groups as much as I could and worked alone. I worked hard. I listened to the strange sounds. I learned new names, new words.[6]

Although children in Chicano literature seem to display dismay and fear when confronted with the specter of learning English, older Chicanos recognize Anglo difficulty with Spanish. The boss of the roundhouse in Barrio Boy is a case in point:

> The superintendent of the yard was a tall, slim gringo who always dressed in tight riding pants and leather puttees. He joked with the men about the dirty words in Spanish that they taught him in exchange for the dirty words in English he told them. When he gave orders he made himself understood in a mix of both languages, practicing his funny Spanish and laughing at himself with the men...
>
> Gustavo chuckled over the gringo's difficulties with Spanish: "What is so hard about saying tortilla? All he can say is "tar-teela." He likes frijoles so much and he calls them "free-holes," he laughed. Between lessons my mother and I practiced "chairt" and "chews" and the rest of our growing vocabulary which Gustavo brought directly from our gringo professor.[7]

The boss is then used by an older Chicano (Gustavo) as an English-speaking model, but a model as heard by Spanish-speaking ears.

> "Do you know what the superintendent wears instead of zapatos?" Gustavo asked. "He wears chews! Ernesto, say zapatos in English."
>
> "Chews."
>
> "Correct."
>
> "When he means sombrero he says "hett." Ernesto, say sombrero in English."
>
> "Hett."
>
> "Correct." So my lessons proceeded with "chairt" for shirt, "pa-eep" for pipe, "hautine-ees" for what time is it, "tenks yu" for thank you, "hau-mochee" for how much, "wan" for one, and "por pleeze" when asking a favor.[8]

An additional recognition, in an acid vein, is Marguarita's thoughts when accosted by an Anglo schoolmate:

> A girl once came up to her one morning as classes were starting. She stared at Marguarita full of meanness. Marguarita's pride senses a new trouble. She was dull with fights.
>
> "Hey you," snarled the girl, waving her stiffly lacquered golden blonde locks at her.
>
> "Yes?" said Marguarita, hugging her books.
>
> "You. You keep away from my boyfriend."
>
> Marguarita kept away from everybody's boyfriends. She stared back. She said nothing, waiting for the explosion.
>
> "My Bill. You keep away from my Bill. He's mine. You hear?"
>
> Bill. Marguarita knew at least four boys named Bill. Which one?
>
> "Now you keep away from mm, spic. You comprainda?"

> Marguarita, bigger and stronger than this whey-faced hate-filled slut, turned away, before her tormentor could have the satisfaction of triggering her temper, or of seeing the tears that were already stinging her eyes. Before the unclean guera could mouth more of her fool sappy Spanish at her, before the indecent wretch had a chance to utter that most loathsome of their favorite phrases, you dirty Mexican, Marguarita turned and fled.[9]

An oblique but important reference to language is contained in the articulation of personal assassination in a school setting. Garcia articulates this kind of incident in "Time Changes Things":

> The teacher wouldn't let me go in the classroom all wet so I sat out in the hall by the heater to dry. The teacher had never liked me anyway. I thought that she probably felt relieved because she wouldn't have to put up with me for a whole class period. It seemed crazy for her to put herself out that way just to get rid of me. She would always catch me talking. She would always send me to the principal. That was her escape. The only thing was that I got along well with the principal. Actually, he wasn't really the principal. He was an assistant. He was a Chicano. When he wasn't busy he would talk to me and tell me about all kinds of things. He would talk about how La Raza was a new type of people, and how we didn't have to wait long before things would change. I really wasn't aware of all the things that he was referring to. I didn't see anything that needed changing. He said that the school needed some spanish-speaking teachers. I never asked him why. In the light of reality, I just could not see a brown face looking down at me and sending me to the principal's office all the time. I didn't even know why it was necessary to go to school. One didn't need to go to school to learn things. Still, he would talk about the reasons why Chicanos like me would get in trouble. I didn't know there were reasons for it. I always thought it just happened.
>
> I sat there over the heater drying and I thought about why I never did what teachers told me to do. How could I, knowing that teachers were stupid. I found this out when I was in the class for the mentally retarded in the third grade. All of my friends were in that class and I wanted to be there too. All I had to do was be bad and not do any of the work, or pretend

> that I did not understand. The teacher would try to get us to identify objects. Every time we guessed right we would get a prize. One week she had fruit and some of us whose parents were out of work got organized. Everyday before class we would meet and decide who was going to guess the right answers. We did that so that everyone would get a chance to take some of the fruit home. Every time someone got the right answer she would give him a point. At the end of the day the one with the highest score would get the fruit. It was like taking candy from a baby. Sometimes I wondered if it wasn't really she who was mentally retarded.[10]

Cokos in "Suffer Little Children" extends articulation to cultural assassination:

> Pride and love are lost within the yellow cumulative folder--
> That one which limits and relegates my boys to hoods and slaves,
> And my girls to early ugliness and pain.
>
> Pride is gone forever from a well equipped science lab--
> When the young scientist can not read;
> From a geography shelf, from a globe, a map, a bowl of flowers
> When their only purpose is destruction
> And the consequence--a silent and unexplained punishment...
>
> Pride is denied and love is lost
> As children stumble through a maze of English
> To hate and deny it.
>
> Pride is lost
> As the glories of the Spanish
> And the brilliance of Cristobal Colon's Indians
> Are lost to their children.
>
> Pride becomes shame
> As the tones of a mother tongue
> Learned from a lullaby or a consejo
> Are wrested and snatched
> From babes who would use them.
>
> Pride does run cold at the sight of
>
> Generations of injustice,
> A slough of meaningless lives
> And unused and unwanted abilities.[11]

Another reference to language is the articulation of exploitation as exemplified by Elizondo in "Perros":

> My grandparents beards tortilla smell,
> skin of sun on earth,
> and tongue that rocks the branches,
> beds, food and customs
> upon the hungry ones bestowed.
> Like the old tale, the little ones grew
> and their families became falsely round.
> And they came not out the door,
> and they stayed within
> the house of earth and sticks.
> The bitches burst
> scattering animals that spoke another tongue.
>
> Yackety-yack of mysteries,
> shitpile of books in court,
> affronts to dark eyes,
> salt water in the milpa.
> The lands were lost
> to false blue eyes
> and the beggar who came to dinner
> cheated the doors and stayed in my home.[12]

The final portion of Alvarez's "The War on Poverty: The Only One We Ever Waited For" recognizes the exploitation but rebels against it:

> Only don't despair,
> My Papa,
> Sidewalks will come rolling
> Beneath your feet;
> Your grandsons will learn
> The meaning of Greek phrases
> Uttered in Chihuahua accents;
> They will feel bright metal
> Bending, Office doors
> Admitting of the Yankee light.
> Promises have been made.
> I follow the long lost orders,
> My tunic was handed me
> And this time no rifle.
> My Caesar has hailed me
> And I heil back;
> This is the only war,
> My father,
> That we waited for.
> I am parachuting
> Once again

Into the backyards
Of our desperation
Where I am shot at
And imprisoned:
Dream-like stockades
Of our disbelief.
Where my fellow officers,
Hands tied, kneeling,
Their thick fingers feeling
At the cynic-tipped bullets
That are driven
Through their heads;
Has anyone remembered
To rip out their hearts?
Has anyone remembered
To clean their memories?
Has anyone remembered
To shut off the blazing
Of their mother's eyes?
I remember, my Papa,
That promises were made;
I remember the young brown eyes
Locked at attention
At the blue Hanging flag
When their teacher
Could not understand
That they would not read,
And that their language
Was their own.
But promises were made,
My Papa,
I now fight the good war
And my weapons
Are my own.[13]

A final concomitant between sociolinguistics and Chicano literature is the almost total absence of intergroup dialogues. The conversational dialogues are almost exclusively intragroup. No striking pattern or patterns seem to emerge in adult conversations. Even kinesic codes are not apparent. Only in the dialogues between children and adults does a pattern emerge. The content of these dialogues is instructional, or didactic; and the form is essentially unilateral. The responses are compliant either in words and/or in actions. And again no kinesic code is evident.

The preceding comments are deducted from literature written by Chicanos from a Chicano perspective. The deductions are indicators of situations created and maintained in language islands by particular people who share ethnic, sociocultural, and linguistic similarities.

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